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ABSTRACT

State/regional consortia for postsecondary support services programs for learning-disabled students can be an effective means of dealing with such problems as overworked staff, personnel without adequate understanding of learning disabilities, declining budgets, and lack of political "clout" to compete for limited resources. Consortia can provide access to up-to-date information, a support group for administrative problems, shared expertise, and effective political action. The federally-funded Northeast Technical Assistance Center for Learning Disability College Programming has developed six consortia to better meet its goals of personnel training, program development, and information sharing. State/regional postsecondary consortia also exist in other parts of the United States. The process of developing a consortium involves selecting a key geographic area in which to begin and building from there; building on earlier efforts sometimes initiated by state higher education agencies; scheduling organizational meetings, and subsequently, topical meetings; establishing "focus" groups to address specific issues; and creating informal channels of communication. Includes 11 references. (JDD)

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IMPLEMENTING REGIONAL CONSORTIA FOR POSTSECONDARY LEARNING DISABILITY PERSONNEL

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IMPLEMENTING REGIONAL CONSORTIA OF POSTSECONDARY LEARNING DISABILITY PERSONNEL

Pressure on institutions of higher education to expand services for students with learning disabilities is coming from advocacy groups, professionals, legislation, concerned parents, and students themselves (Vogel, 1982; Norlander, Shaw & McGuire, 1989). This has resulted in students with learning disabilities becoming the largest single group of postsecondary students with disabilities seeking support services (King, 1987). In spite of the increasing numbers, fewer than one third of all postsecondary institutions have specific learning disability programs. The programs that do provide support services are often characterized by overworked staff, and personnel without adequate understanding of learning disabilities (Adults with Learning Disabilities, 1986; Mangram & Strichart, 1988; Norlander, Shaw & McGuire, 1989).

Administrators of learning disability support programs can typically be characterized as individuals committed to serving their students with learning disabilities while at the same time they face increasing numbers with stable or declining budgets. They are often the one isolated individual on their campus advocating for these students, but they

usually lack the authority or political "clout" to successfully compete for limited resources.

Factors of Regional Consortia

We have found state/regional consortia to be an effective means to deal with the problems described above. The concept of strength in numbers clearly applies here. Groups of service providers are much more effective at influencing legislators, state agencies and consumer groups (Shaw, Norlander & McGuire, 1987). The ability to quickly access information from other service providers can be very beneficial when dealing with policy issues. For example, one program administrator was able to get approval for a previously denied waiver policy when she was able to cite comparable institutions in the state with a similar provision. Another L.D. Coordinator was able to modify the institution's admissions policy based on similar data.

The field of postsecondary learning disabilities is in its infancy. There are very limited data on effective interventions or appropriate program models. Given this rapidly developing area it is necessary to have access to up-to-date information. Service providers and program administrators rarely have the time or funds to travel to national conferences. Other than the annual AHSSPPE conference, there are few conventions which provide information which would be helpful. Meetings of state/regional consortia are more likely to meet the specific

needs of members. Specific problems of inner-city or rural service providers can be met in local settings. State consortia can effectively deal with issues of admission, definition, policy and procedure because they deal with the same constituencies and agencies and, together can formulate change which is likely to be implemented.

Postsecondary learning disability personnel are often overwhelmed by the need to serve up to 100 students on their own. This overload combined with the fact that many are not well trained to meet all of the roles for which they are responsible can lead to stress and burnout (Shaw, Bensky & Dixon, 1981). A support group of colleagues who understand the problems and may be dealing with them themselves, can be very comforting. Sharing expertise and suggestions can help to minimize stress and promote active problem solving. Political action undertaken by the network can result in additional resources to actually lessen the load for everyone involved.

Establishing Regional Networks

The Northeast Technical Assistance Center for Learning Disability College Programming (NETAC), a project funded by the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services, was established to develop and enhance learning disability college programming in the Northeastern states (Brinckerhoff & Anderson, 1988).

The project's major goals are:

- To train personnel from each state in the region to provide on-site technical assistance to their own campus staff and faculty.
- To promote the development of effective L.D. college programs and enhance the ability of L.D. college personnel and college administrators to implement appropriate programs for students with learning disabilities in postsecondary institutions throughout the region.
- To provide a network for information sharing, dissemination of "best practices", and the development of policies regarding college students with learning disabilities.

Project personnel have found that the development of state/regional consortia is the most effective way to fulfil those goals. During the last two years NETAC has been involved in developing six consortia. Most consortia have focused on a single state but multi-state (Maine-Vermont-New Hampshire) and metropolitan (greater New York City) networks have also been developed.

The process of developing a consortium begins with the identification of key personnel and/or agencies in the region. It is imperative that prospective network leaders have a vision for postsecondary learning disabilities program development in their area. Other attributes which are helpful are postsecondary learning disability expertise, personal respect or recognition from others in the region, organizational skills and some resources (mailing, secretarial, etc.). An initial organizational meeting can be

called to do preliminary planning for the consortium. Issues to be discussed could include:

1. What is the logical geographical area for the consortium (state or regional)?

2. What type if consortium focus - a) LD or cross disability; b) institutions - all postsecondary institutions or only 2 year?, 4 year?, public?, private?; c) organizations - only postsecondary institutions or including state agencies (DVR, Dept. of Higher Ed., Dept. of Educ.), secondary personnel, consumers (ACLD, Orton), private counselors, and/or professional organizations (AHSSPPE, NADE, NCEOA).

3. Who will take responsibility for planning the first meeting and inviting individuals and agencies to attend.

The first large group meeting could involve a speaker or program but must include decisions about the issues described above. It would be very helpful if the planning group comes into this large meeting with specific recommendations based upon their previous discussion(s). Before leaving, the group should establish leadership and set additional meeting dates. Some groups are able to quickly set goals for the consortium, others have established committees or initiated a needs assessment.

Postsecondary consortia have been operating throughout the country. One of the first was set up in California (Campisi-Johns, 1988) which divided by type of institution (community college, state university, university). Others have been developed in Colorado (Bowsen & Kreston, 1988)-which has a cross disability focus; New Jersey (Kress, 1988)-which was initiated by the Department of Higher Education; Northern

Illinois and Western North Carolina-which represent regional efforts. In the following section the activities of the learning disability consortia associated with NETAC in the Northeast will be described.

Regional Consortia in the Northeast

The task of developing a regional consortium within an eight state area may initially appear overwhelming. In order to begin the networking process effectively from the onset, NETAC staff started small. The first state consortium established in the Northeast on postsecondary LD college programming was in Rhode Island. Rhode Island was selected due to its geographic size, its close proximity to Connecticut, and the fact that several LD service providers and higher education administration officials were already informally discussing LD adult issues in the state. The Rhode Island consortium is co-chaired by a representative from the University of Rhode Island and a representative from the Community College of Rhode Island. The first two meetings focused on the mission of the group and were facilitated by NETAC staff. Subsequent meetings were run by the state members and NETAC staff provided additional input when requested. The Rhode Island group has held 4 or 5 meetings each year and has implemented a featured speaker format. Guest speakers have been invited to discuss a variety of topics ranging from assessment of learning disabilities to Section 504. Generally the sessions are attended by 15-20

individuals from a broad range of constituencies such as parent support groups and DVR counselors. During the first year of the task force, a resource guide was developed profiling the postsecondary services available in Rhode Island. This guide has been distributed primarily to high school guidance personnel.

In Connecticut, networking through the NETAC grant was facilitated by building on some earlier efforts initiated by the State Department of Higher Education. Two years previously, a state consortium on learning disabilities was established and key personnel were already identified. The focus of the Connecticut consortium in 1989 was to broaden the state postsecondary network to include participation from the five state technical colleges. Through the funding efforts of the Connecticut Department of Higher Education, a resource guide of support services for students with learning disabilities in Connecticut was developed. This guide includes a profile of over 40 two and four year institutions in the state and was distributed to every high school guidance department. The information contained in the guide can also be easily updated annually.

New Jersey has taken the lead in the area of LD college programming by establishing several regional LD support programs that are underwritten by the New Jersey Department of Higher Education. The NETAC consortium concept built upon these earlier efforts by networking with the State Department

of Higher Education and the LD coordinators at the four regional campuses. After an initial planning meeting, the New Jersey members elected to establish a variety of subcommittees or "focus groups" to address some specific issues of interest to LD service providers. The subcommittees are presently looking at a variety of issues including faculty and staff development, funding concerns, and transition issues. Each subcommittee is headed by one of the four regional coordinators in the state. Plans for next year involve the updating of a New Jersey Department of Higher Education directory of LD support services and the development of fact sheets for parents of high school students with learning disabilities.

The state of Massachusetts has the largest constituency with well over 90 members. Due to the heavy concentration of colleges in the Boston area, meetings were held at a local community college. Like the other consortia, meetings have been held on a quarterly basis and the two co-chairs have followed a topical session format. Unlike the other state groups, however, the first half of the meeting has been directed towards a topic of general concern to all participants. After a break, the larger group splits up into smaller groups reflecting the concerns of either two or four year institutions. The format of the small groups is more informal and is characterized by information sharing and discussion.

The New York consortium is one of the newest state groups to be established under the NETAC grant. The first planning meeting followed the May 1989 "Learning How to Learn" conference at Long Island University. The first task of this group is to interface with the existing disability groups in the New York metropolitan area. The New York AHSSPPE group and the CUNY system will be contacted this fall regarding the NETAC grant and the establishment of an LD postsecondary task force. Concerns of this group involve developing a state-wide definition of learning disabilities and a directory of resources and services available around the state.

The final consortia to be established under the grant is "North Country NETAC." This group is composed of LD service providers, related professionals, and administrators in Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. The first planning meeting will be held in October. One of the first concerns of this group is to find out what services are being offered to college students with learning disabilities in the rural Northeast.

Summary

One technique for expanding the networking opportunities of LD service providers in postsecondary education is to establish state or regional consortia which can address a variety of LD programming issues. By developing effective state or regional consortia, LD service providers can share resources and information, and establish informal channels of

communication in a cost-effective manner. In the final year of the grant, NETAC staff support will be reduced so that state and regional consortia will become self-supporting independent technical assistance networks.

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